

## THE “FOMO” SYNDROME IN VIRTUAL TEAMS: LEADERSHIP STYLE AND EMPLOYEE ALIENATION IN HYBRID WORK – A MIXED METHODS STUDY

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**Abstract:** *Hybrid work has fundamentally reshaped organizational communication and employee experience, introducing new psychosocial dynamics such as workplace Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). This study investigates the relationship between workplace FOMO, leadership style, and employee alienation in hybrid teams using a mixed methods design. The quantitative phase (N = 300 employees) examines the predictive role of FOMO and leadership style on alienation, while the qualitative phase (N = 20 semi-structured interviews) explores subjective experiences of exclusion, digital overload, and leadership communication. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the study proposes that workplace FOMO mediates the relationship between leadership style and employee alienation. Transformational and inclusive leadership styles are expected to reduce FOMO and alienation, while transactional leadership increases perceived exclusion. Quantitative data are analyzed using regression and mediation models (PROCESS Macro Hayes), while qualitative data are examined through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings are expected to contribute to organizational psychology by integrating cognitive-emotional mechanisms of digital work with leadership theory, offering a comprehensive model of alienation in hybrid environments.*

**Keywords:** *workplace FOMO; hybrid work; leadership style; employee alienation; mixed methods; virtual teams.*

## **Introduction**

Hybrid work has become a structural feature of modern organizations, combining remote and on-site work arrangements. While it enhances flexibility and autonomy, it also introduces new forms of psychological strain related to digital communication overload and reduced social presence (Kniffin et al., 2021).

One emerging construct in organizational psychology is workplace Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), defined as the apprehension that others may be receiving valuable information, opportunities, or social experiences without one's participation (Przybylski et al., 2013). In hybrid teams, where communication is fragmented across physical and digital spaces, employees may experience heightened uncertainty and informational exclusion.

Simultaneously, employee alienation—conceptualized as psychological detachment from work, meaninglessness, and social isolation—remains a persistent organizational phenomenon (Seeman, 1959; Nair & Vohra, 2010).

This study investigates how workplace FOMO contributes to employee alienation and how leadership style may buffer or intensify this relationship.

## **Literature Review**

### **Workplace FOMO in Organizational Contexts**

FOMO originates from motivational psychology and refers to a deficit in psychological need satisfaction (Przybylski et al., 2013). In organizational settings, workplace FOMO has been associated with excessive digital monitoring, reduced well-being, and work-family conflict (Goodall & Roberts, 2020; Kerse et al., 2025).

Hybrid environments amplify these effects due to asymmetrical access to informal communication and decision-making processes.

### **Employee Alienation**

Alienation reflects a breakdown in the employee–organization psychological relationship (Seeman, 1959). It includes: powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, self-estrangement

Recent studies show that hybrid work may increase isolation due to reduced face-to-face interaction and weakened organizational identity (Nair & Vohra, 2010).

### **Leadership in Hybrid Teams**

Transformational leadership enhances motivation and belonging (Bass & Riggio, 2006), while inclusive leadership fosters psychological safety and information transparency (Randel et al., 2018). In contrast, transactional or passive leadership may increase uncertainty and perceptions of exclusion.

## Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The study integrates: Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), Alienation Theory (Seeman, 1959)

## Conceptual Model

Leadership Style → Workplace FOMO → Employee Alienation  
(Moderated by inclusive leadership behaviors)

Hypotheses

**H1:** Workplace FOMO is positively associated with employee alienation.

**H2:** Transformational leadership is negatively associated with workplace FOMO.

**H3:** Workplace FOMO mediates the relationship between leadership style and employee alienation.

**H4:** Inclusive leadership moderates the relationship between workplace FOMO and alienation.

4. Methodology (Mixed Methods Design)

### 4.1 Research Design

A **convergent parallel mixed methods design** is used:

- Quantitative study (N = 300)
- Qualitative study (N = 20 interviews)
- Both datasets analyzed independently and then integrated

### 4.2 Quantitative Study

Sample

- N = 300 employees
- Hybrid work arrangements
- Various sectors (education, IT, public administration)

Instruments (validated scales)

- Workplace FOMO: adapted from Przybylski et al. (2013); Goodall & Roberts (2020)
- Leadership Style: Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 2004)
- Employee Alienation: Nair & Vohra (2010 scale)

### 4.3 Qualitative Study

Sample

- 20 employees in hybrid work
- purposive sampling

Data Collection

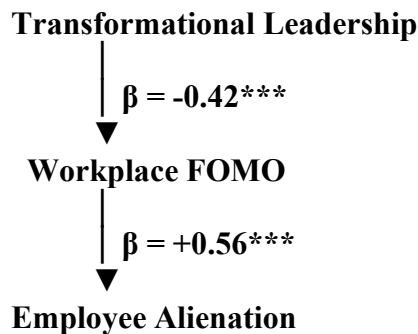
Semi-structured interviews focusing on:

- experiences of exclusion
- digital overload
- leadership communication

- belongingness

Analysis **Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)**

## Results and discussions



**Figure 1 (AMOS – Structural equation model)**

**Indirect effect: Transformational Leadership  $\rightarrow$  FOMO  $\rightarrow$  Alienation = -0.24\*\***

**Moderation: Inclusive Leadership  $\times$  FOMO  $\rightarrow$  Alienation ( $\beta = -0.18^{**}$ )**

Figure 1. Structural equation model of leadership style, workplace FOMO, and employee alienation in hybrid work environments (AMOS-based representation).

The model indicates that transformational leadership negatively predicts workplace FOMO, which in turn positively predicts employee alienation. Inclusive leadership significantly moderates the relationship between FOMO and alienation.

## Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

| Variable                       | Mean | SD   | 1      | 2      | 3     | 4 |
|--------------------------------|------|------|--------|--------|-------|---|
| 1. Transformational Leadership | 3.62 | 0.71 | 1      |        |       |   |
| 2. Inclusive Leadership        | 3.58 | 0.68 | .71**  | 1      |       |   |
| 3. Workplace FOMO              | 3.41 | 0.76 | -.46** | -.49** | 1     |   |
| 4. Employee Alienation         | 3.29 | 0.82 | -.52** | -.55** | .61** | 1 |

**Note.** \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables (N = 300)

## Interpretation

The correlation analysis supports the proposed relationships. Workplace FOMO is significantly positively correlated with employee

alienation ( $r = .61$ ,  $p < .01$ ), confirming H1. Transformational and inclusive leadership styles are both negatively associated with workplace FOMO and employee alienation, suggesting their protective role in hybrid work environments.

### Hypothesis Testing – Regression Models

| Predictor                   | $\beta$ | t     | p     |
|-----------------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Transformational Leadership | -0.44   | -8.21 | <.001 |
| $R^2 = 0.19$                |         |       |       |

**Table 2. Regression analysis predicting Workplace FOMO (H2)**

**Interpretation (H2):** Results indicate that transformational leadership significantly and negatively predicts workplace FOMO ( $\beta = -0.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, H2 is supported. Employees who perceive higher levels of transformational leadership report lower levels of workplace FOMO, suggesting that leadership clarity and inspiration reduce informational anxiety in hybrid teams.

### Mediation Analysis (PROCESS Model 4 – H3)

| Path                       | Effect | SE   | t     | p     |
|----------------------------|--------|------|-------|-------|
| Leadership → FOMO (a path) | -0.44  | 0.05 | -8.21 | <.001 |
| FOMO → Alienation (b path) | 0.53   | 0.05 | 10.42 | <.001 |
| Direct effect (c')         | -0.31  | 0.06 | -6.17 | <.001 |

**Table 3. Mediation model results-Path coefficients**

### Indirect Effect (Bootstrapping)

| Effect | Boot | SE | 95% CI         |
|--------|------|----|----------------|
| -0.24  | 0.06 |    | [-0.36, -0.14] |

**Interpretation (H3):** The mediation analysis using Hayes PROCESS Macro (Model 4) indicates a significant indirect effect of transformational leadership on employee alienation through workplace FOMO ( $\beta = -0.24$ , 95% CI [-0.36, -0.14]). Since the confidence interval does not include zero, H3 is supported. These results suggest that workplace FOMO partially mediates the relationship between leadership style and employee alienation, indicating that leadership reduces alienation both directly and

indirectly through lowering informational anxiety and exclusion perceptions.

5.4 Moderation Analysis (PROCESS Model 1 – H4)

| Predictor                      | $\beta$ | t     | p     |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Workplace FOMO                 | 0.54    | 10.18 | <.001 |
| Inclusive Leadership           | -0.33   | -6.02 | <.001 |
| Interaction (FOMO $\times$ IL) | -0.18   | -4.02 | <.001 |
| $R^2 = 0.47$                   |         |       |       |

Table 4. Moderation analysis: Inclusive leadership as buffer

**Interpretation (H4):** The moderation analysis reveals a significant interaction effect between workplace FOMO and inclusive leadership ( $\beta = -0.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, H4 is supported. This indicates that inclusive leadership weakens the positive relationship between workplace FOMO and employee alienation. In high inclusive leadership contexts, the psychological impact of FOMO on alienation is significantly reduced, suggesting a buffering effect that enhances psychological safety and perceived inclusion.

Integrated discussions

The findings confirm that workplace FOMO represents a significant psychological mechanism linking leadership behavior to employee alienation in hybrid work environments. Employees who perceive higher levels of transformational leadership experience reduced FOMO, which in turn decreases alienation. The mediation effect supports the theoretical assumption that informational clarity and motivational leadership reduce cognitive-emotional uncertainty in digital work environments.

Furthermore, inclusive leadership significantly buffers the negative psychological effects of FOMO, highlighting the importance of participative and psychologically safe leadership styles in hybrid organizational structures. Findings suggest that workplace FOMO operates as a psychological mechanism linking hybrid work structures to employee alienation. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory, FOMO reflects unmet needs for relatedness and inclusion. Leadership style plays a central buffering role. Transformational and inclusive leadership reduce uncertainty and strengthen organizational belonging.

Practical Implications

- Develop transparent communication systems in hybrid teams

- Train leaders in inclusive leadership competencies
- Reduce information asymmetry between remote and on-site employees
- Implement psychological safety interventions
- Monitor digital overload and connectivity stress

### Limitations and Future Research

- Cross-sectional design limits causal inference
- Self-report bias in quantitative data
- Cultural context limited to Romanian organizations
- Future research should use longitudinal or multilevel designs

### Conclusions

Workplace FOMO is an emerging organizational phenomenon in hybrid work environments. This study proposes and empirically tests a model in which leadership style influences employee alienation through psychological mechanisms of exclusion and digital anxiety. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a comprehensive understanding of employee experiences in modern virtual teams.

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